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ABSTRACT

The author defines classroom aggression, deals with the possible explanations as to why such behavior occurs, looks at possible misconceptions related to classroom aggression, and points out items which need to be looked at when analyzing classroom aggression. Two types of aggression--hostile and instrumental--are considered. Determinants of aggression are seen to include social, environmental, situational, and individual factors. Among the misconceptions regarding classroom aggression are that aggression is a drive that must be released through some process and the best educators can do is channel the means by which this is done and that frustration is the primary cause of aggression and always leads to aggression. Suggestions offered include the following: take a look at the type of aggression seen in pupils, take steps accordingly, look at many different possible causes, remember that the teacher's behavior is important, take a critical look at what seems to be "common sense," keep a record of the effects of various interventions, and look at the target of aggression. (SB)

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One Look at Aggression in the Classroom

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Classroom aggression seems to be a topic which rarely emerges without numerous opinions being expressed. To some, all that is needed to eliminate the problem is firmer expectations and consequences. Others assert that there is little we can do in the schools with aggressive behavior unless changes are made in the home. Occasionally you will hear that this aggression is necessary to ventilate pent-up feelings accumulated throughout childhood or adolescence. All of these explanations plus many others leave us confused if we are looking for the answer.

Maybe the fact that there is no singular explanation or solution is one of the most important conclusions we can draw. Perhaps after we reach this conclusion, we can move beyond being dazzled by a particular approach that we saw Sunday on "60 Minutes" and which we are sure will work with our kids.

This paper will combine a look at some related research with the personnel observations of this writer. After a definition of classroom aggression, the next section will deal with the possible explanations as to why such behavior occurs. This will be followed by a section dealing with possible misconceptions related to classroom aggression. A final section will deal with items which need to be looked at when analyzing classroom aggression.

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What Is Classroom Aggression?

Many writers have noted the difficulties in consistently defining what is meant by "aggression" (Baron, 1977; Bandura, 1973; Knutson, 1973). For the purposes of this discussion, classroom aggression is defined as any form of behavior exhibited by a pupil in a classroom directed toward harming or disrupting the education of other pupils who are motivated to avoid such treatment.

Does a student act aggressively in our classrooms just for the sake of hurting someone else; perhaps even the teacher? Or, are these acts performed with the goal of obtaining other benefits such as attention, or getting one's way? In all likelihood, we see both types of aggression in the classroom.

The first type of aggression described above, which is less frequently observed, is referred to as **hostile aggression.** As Baron (1977) has described, the primary goal sought by the antagonist in this type of aggression is to cause his/her victim to suffer. Such aggression when observed appears "irrational," with no apparent goal other than the harming of others.

A second, and more commonly observed type of aggression has been termed **instrumental aggression.** In this situation the aggressor attacks another person primarily as a means of attaining goals which go beyond the aggressive act itself. Examples of this would be a desire to avoid the task at hand or a need to intimidate others who are watching the aggressive act. Such aggression is primarily manipulative and is more readily amenable to operant (behavior modification) intervention strategies.

One note of caution would be appropriate here. This separation of aggression into types relies on what some writers have warned us to avoid. That is, by dividing classroom aggression into hostile and instrumental, we are making assumptions regarding

the intent of a particular youngster's aggressive behavior. As Knutson (1973) has pointed out, the issue of intent has been prominent in aggression research and we must be careful to anchor our suppositions regarding aggressive intent with observable events which tend to verify the hostile or instrumental nature of a particular aggressive act.

Determinants of Aggression

The causes of aggressive behavior often baffle us as educators. In reviewing the literature on aggression it appears that the determinants outlined by Baron (1977) are appropriate. These include social determinants, environmental and situational determinants and individual determinants.

Social determinants, according to Baron (1977) are the social antecedents of aggression and include frustration, direct provocation from others, exposure to the actions of aggressive models, orders or commands from superiors and the presence or absence of bystanders.

The idea of frustration leading directly to and being one of the primary causes of aggression has been popular in psychology since publication of the classic study *Frustration and Aggression* by Dollard, Doob, Miller, Mowrer and Sears in 1939. To many, this frustration -- aggression hypothesis offered the most logical and frequently operating explanation for aggressive acts. After all, don't we all feel aggressive when we are blocked from achieving what we deserve or desire? The degree of face validity and "seductive simplicity" of this explanation for aggression has led to wide acceptance.

More recently, however, reviews of the various empirical investigations of this explanation have led to a professional questioning of this explanation (Baron, 1977; Bandura, 1973; Bandura and Walter, 1963). As Jersild (1968) states:

> The view that frustration leads to aggression was regarded some years ago as virtually axiomatic. A less tidy but more correct statement is that frustration **may** lead to aggression, or it may produce any one or more of several other types of responses, or no noticeable response at all. (290)

Being directly provoked by others, either physically or verbally, is a rather obvious social determinant of aggression. The most common example in the classroom would be a pupil provoking or insulting another to the point of aggression. The work of Greenwell and Dengerink (1973) has pointed out that even the *thought* that another person harbors hostile intentions against one may lead to aggressive behavior! This latter observation may be particularly important if a student believes that a teacher has hostile intentions against him/her. Inconsistent discipline measures taken by an untrusted teacher may be the antecedent to an explosive aggressive act by a pupil under such circumstances.

The role that modeling assumes in aggression has been examined through the work of Bandura (1969, 1973 & 1977) and certainly appears to be important. Exposure to peers behaving in aggressive ways, in some situations, does seem to elicit aggressive behavior. More recently, the role of televised violence on children's and adolescent's behavior is being examined. Some writers have contended that such mediated violence has a "cathartic" or release valve function, but, as will be discussed later in this paper, such a rationale is questionable.

Pressure from perceived superiors can be another cause of aggressive behavior. In this situation one student might use his/her influence with individuals as well as the peer group in creating such behavior. Variables affecting whether a pupil responds to such pressure include the prestige held by the "superior" encouraging such actions, the numbers of peers typically heeding such direction, and the potential consequences accrued as the result of following or not following such directions. Another factor which has been shown to be related to aggressive behavior under certain circumstances is the presence or absence of bystanders (Baron, 1971; Barden, 1975). The anticipation of approval or disapproval from these bystanders may affect the situation.

Environmental determinants of aggression within the classroom include such factors as noise, crowding and heat. Other, individually-oriented factors which interact with these environmental factors include heightened arousal, conditioning and such variables as drugs. Research into these environmental and situational variables seems sparce, and it is beyond the scope of this paper to examine each of these variables in detail. Suffice it to say that the classroom teacher should be sensitive to the role of these environmental and situational variables, especially in relation to irritable or hostile aggression.

Individual determinants of aggression in the classroom include those characteristics which have been traditionally subsumed under such headings as basic drives, instinctual determinants and inherited tendencies. According to these explanations of aggression, much credence is placed on those tendencies of aggression which individuals allegedly carry within them. Denenberg (1973) has called into question many of these explanations in his work dealing with developmental factors related to aggressive behavior. Olweus (1972), in reviewing the instinctual theories related to aggression concludes:

> The theories seem to have little explanatory value besides vague and sweeping generalizations, nor have they stimulated empirical research on aggression to any marked extent. (274)

From this review, it appears that many factors can lead to aggressive behavior in students. Some of these seem to be more directed toward the environmental circumstances present when such behavior is manifested while other factors seem to be more individual specific.

The individual determinants approach to aggressive behavior as opposed to the environmental factors explanation seems similar to the classic "state versus trait" debate surrounding how we explain deviant behavior. According to the "state" school of thought, deviant behavior can be explained by examining the environmental circumstances surrounding a deviant act. Individual manifestations

Iowa Perspective 1980-81; A Note from the Editor:

When I am asked what type of behavior causes a youngster's placement into one of our programs for emotionally disabled or chronically disruptive students, aggression of one form or another most quickly comes to mind. This behavior, in both verbal and physical forms, has been readily pointed out by the press as another indicator of the crisis facing public education today. The annual poll conducted for *Phi Delta Kappan* by George Gallup has, for the last several years, noted that "classroom discipline" is the major concern expressed by the public regarding the state of American education.

Last year I had a chance to look at this issue a bit more systematically while taking a course in "Readings in Psychology" under the direction of Dr. John Knutson at the University of Iowa. Professor Knutson has studied aggression; mainly through laboratory research, over several years and in 1973 edited a book, *The Control of Aggression: Implications From Basic Research* (Aldine Publishing Company). The first paper in this issue, "One Look at Aggression in the Classroom" is an attempt to intertwine research in human aggression with the recollections I have of attempting to deal with such behavior as a teacher and the observations I have made of others dealing with similar behavior. I hope this discussion holds some value for you.

The second article in this issue, "Issues to Consider in the Use of Physical Restraint and Time-Out Procedures" is a paper that was presented at the 58th Annual Council for Exceptional Children Convention this past April. Based on the degree of interest I have heard expressed about this topic, I thought this paper would be appropriate.

Following these two articles is a "Reader Evaluation Form." I will appreciate your thoughts and suggestions.

The *Iowa Perspective* hopes to continue to offer material which is consistently informative and at times controversial. Among the articles planned this year will be one by Hill Walker on "Barriers to the Integration of Behaviorally Disordered Students Into the Regular Classroom" and an article dealing with "Teaching Written Expression Skills" by Clay Starlin.

At the close of this issue are the agenda, speakers' profiles and registration information for the third annual midwest conference on educational programs for emotionally disabled and chronically disruptive students. The program promises to offer valuable and thought-provoking discussions. Please pre-register if you wish to attend this meeting.

In closing I should also mention something else. The editor of any publication gets the most credit or criticism. On the credit side you should know that Marcia Olson, through her diligent work and questioning mind, deserves much of the credit for making this publication possible.

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of behavioral deviancy will vary from situation to situation. This approach to behavioral deviancy seems more optimistic in that it implies that if changes can be made in the environmental circumstances, then rates of deviant behavior such as aggression can be modified accordingly. Rhodes (1979) has been one of the primary advocates for this approach in the education of behaviorally deviant children.

According to the "trait" school of thought, deviant behavior is more the function of the characteristics of an individual rather than the environment. With this approach an individual possesses a trait such as excess aggression which manifests itself across many different settings.

In reviewing the various causes of aggression, it becomes obvious that there are some which are consistent with a "state" approach while others are more "trait" oriented. It also seems that to attribute aggression exclusively to either environmental or individual characteristics would be naive. As Cronbach (1975) seems to conclude, in reality we are dealing with a multitude of interacting variables and to assume causality in either direction, environment or individual, does not seem to make sense.

Common Misconceptions Regarding Classroom Aggression

When reviewing the recent literature dealing with aggression, it became apparent to this writer that many ideas and perhaps practices which many of us report "make sense" are not supported through empirical findings. In this section several of the "common misconceptions" will be reviewed.

"Catharsis"

According to this view, aggression is a drive that must be released through some process and the best we can do as educators is to channel the means by which this is done. In applying this concept, the classroom teacher may send Johnny to the corner to "blow off steam" or may set up a punching bag to allow his/her students to "get it out of their systems." Like many theoretical constructs, the theory of catharsis may suffer from the tendency to oversimplify a complex process.

It seems that the effectiveness of a catharsis approach may be limited to irritable or hostile aggression. This is the type of aggression which

appears to be irrational in direction. In this type of aggression, it seems that the antecedent events to the aggressive act are in much more of a controlling stance rather than the consequences of a given act. Such events as a high level of anxiety in the aggressor or environmental circumstances such as heat or crowding might contribute to the probability of this type of aggression. In this case, to remove a youngster and allow him/her to go to a designated less stressful spot in the classroom may remove the antecedent conditions and reduce the probability of aggression occurring. Patterson and Cobb (1973) describe such an approach as using a "precursor intervention."

However, the proponents of a "catharsis" approach to aggression have gone further than the above description in advocating the way to deal with aggressive behavior. Such proponents have stated that by encouraging aggression in one arena (for example, a punching bag) that overall aggression will be reduced. Such does not seem to be the case. Bandura (1973) cites the work on Goramson (1970) and Siegel (1970) and concludes that, ". . . ventilative therapies, aimed at draining aggressive drives, may be inadvertently reinforcing aggressive tendencies." Berkowitz (1973) supports this view and states:

> . . . there simply is very little empirical support for the contention that people will "drain" a supposedly pent-up aggression drive by attacking just anyone available or by displaying their hostile feelings. The outcome might be just the opposite: a greater rather than lesser likelihood of subsequent aggression. (37)

"Aggression Is an Indication of Psychopathology"

A second misconception regarding classroom aggression is that the manifestation of such aggression is an expression of a much more all inclusive individual psychopathology. This may lead one to think that individuals are either aggressive or non-aggressive and that environmental circumstances contribute only slightly to the expression of aggressive behavior. Knutson (1973), commenting on a series of papers in an edited volume, concludes:

> The most obvious point of concensus is at the level of distinguishing between the pathological or non-pathological essence of aggressive behavior . . . all studies hold the position that aggressive behaviors are generally a function of the operation of variables that do not have overtones of psychopathology or abnormal behavior. (287)

There are implications when we realize the basically non-pathological nature of aggression. This conclusion verifies the importance of carefully analyzing aggressive behavior rather than trying to relate this behavior to an overall pathological pattern. Furthermore, it leads to an optimistic direction in our ability to modify such behavior and to a more positive prognosis with such interventions.

"The Role of Consequences"

One view, which has been perhaps inadvertently stressed via operant research, is that all behavior is controlled by the consequences following such behavior. But, as pointed out by Patterson and Cobb (1973), the antecedents leading to a particular event may also be important in determining the particular behavioral repertoire exhibited by a youngster. The role of antecedent events seems to be particularly important in what was described earlier as hostile or irritable aggression. In such a situation, the use of punishment, time-out, or other consequent interventions would not appear to be appropriate. As Baron (1977) states, ". . . direct punishment may often backfire and totally fail to inhibit aggression -- or may actually tend to increase its occurrence." (238)

For planning interventions to be used within a program, this finding again implies that a closer look must be taken at the aggressive act. If, upon closer examination, the aggressive act appears to be of an irritable or hostile nature, then interventions other than time-out, etc., might be more successful. These might include modifying the environment, using such techniques as relaxation training or other precursor interventions to reduce the probability of the aggressive act occurring.

"Targets of Aggression"

Another misconception which has influenced our approaches to aggression in the classroom has been an almost total fixation with the aggressive child with little or no attention being paid to the characteristics of the "target" individuals who are the recipients of such aggressive acts. Yet, as Knutson (1973) points out, individual differences in "target" either directly influence differences in aggressive behavior or interact with individual differences to determine the frequency of aggressive behavior. It seems that this factor would be more related to instrumental as opposed to hostile aggression.

Patterson, Littman and Bricker (1967) found that the behavioral characteristics of a victim were an important contribution to aggression in a nursery school setting. These results have been supported by other human research by Patterson & Cobb (1973), Baron (1971a, 1971b, 1974) and Berkowitz (1973). In regard to aggressive behavior directed toward teachers, the work of Kounin (1977) has found that specific behavioral characteristics of teachers seem to be related to classroom levels of aggressive behavior.

On the basis of these results, it becomes apparent that efforts to control aggressive behavior should not solely rest with interventions aimed directly at the aggressor. If a teacher is the object of aggression, then time should be taken to examine those behavioral characteristics which may be establishing such a teacher as a "target" of aggression. If a particular youngster in our classroom is commonly the target of aggression from several sources, then perhaps our interventions should be directed at carefully analyzing those particular behaviors which tend to set this youngster up for aggressive acts by others.

"Frustration Leads to Aggression"

The primary misconception related to this hypothesis is that frustration is the primary cause of aggression and to some, always leads to aggression. As pointed out earlier in this paper, such an over-

simplified explanation of aggression has been found wanting by recent investigators.

Such a misconception may lead to some inappropriate as well as ineffective measures being initiated by a classroom teacher. For example, if one accepts this explanation in its totality, then the reduction of all frustration within the classroom should minimize the occurrence of aggressive behavior. By accepting this premise, a teacher might reduce all instructional materials to levels far below his/her students' ability levels and allow students behaviorally to express themselves with few, if any, imposed teacher barriers. This writer would predict that any teacher who subscribes to such an intervention strategy is in for a difficult time.

Just as oversimplification plagues many areas of aggression in the classroom, so does reduction of frustration as a primary intervention strategy. Frustration undeniably contributes to aggression in many situations -- as do many other factors.

So What Do We Know?

After looking back over this paper, it seems that equivocation abounds when looking at the various aspects of aggression. How can one appreciate the complexities of the phenomenon of aggression yet do something about it on Monday morning? What follows are a few suggestions for actions we can take in dealing with aggressive behavior.

1) **Take a look at the type of aggression seen in pupils.** Does it seem to be directed toward a purpose or is it just a "blow-up?"
2) **Take steps accordingly.** If the aggression seems to just happen, then see what changes can be made to reduce the tension before it happens. If, on the other hand, payoffs are coming after the fact, do your best to eliminate the payoffs.
3) **Look at many different possible causes.** Resign yourself to the conclusion that you are probably not going to find a single cause of the behavior.
4) **Remember that your behavior is important.** Think about what you are going to do in dealing with this behavior. Be consistent, yet pay attention to the effects of your approaches.
5) **Take a critical look at what seems to be "common sense."** What seems to make sense doesn't always work. Be careful not to generalize one intervention which you have found successful to all similar situations.
6) **Keep a record of the effects of various interventions.** Don't rely on your memory to let you know whether something seems to be working or not.
7) **Look at the target of aggression.** What can be done with that person whether it be you or another student? Can you help to make this person less of a target?

Aggressive behavior seems to be one of the primary reasons students are referred to ED/CD programs. It is time we begin to take a more systematic look at such behavior. The reduction of aggressive behavior seems to be critical in the eventual return of these students to the regular classroom. The appropriate expression of aggression seems related to the long term adjustment of all of us. Bandura (1973) has stated, "Complex behavior does not emerge as a unitary pattern, but is formed through integration of many component activities of differing origins." (202) Aggression certainly qualifies as a complex behavior, but that does not mean it is beyond careful analysis and thoughtful interventions.

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